



Martens Come Home

FWP and trappers team up to restore native furbearers to their historical habitat in the Little Belt Mountains.

BY TOM KUGLIN

A low growl rumbles from the pine box sitting in the snow, then tapers off for a few seconds as the container's occupant gingerly pokes its head out before quickly retreating back inside.

This in-and-out dance goes on for 30 minutes as

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks wildlife technician Rob Francisco awaits a marten that seems in no hurry to exit its confines. Francisco tries tapping the box to see if the cat-sized furbearer will skeddaddle. Nope. ▶▶

NOT QUITE READY Recently transferred from a forest near Georgetown Lake, a marten peers from a transfer box set in the Little Belt Mountains before dashing out to explore its new home.

PHOTO BY MORGAN JACOBSEN/MONTANA FWP

“They all have their own personalities,” Francisco says, turning the box so the opening aims skyward. “Some come right out and just take off. But most of them exit pretty slowly and take a look around.”

Who can blame the critter for being cautious. Yesterday it entered this same box near Georgetown Lake, attracted by a scrap of beaver meat tucked inside. After a 300-mile truck ride east, then a trip on a snowmobile from King’s Hill, it became the final animal released into the Little Belt Mountains in FWP’s first marten translocation project in more than half a century, conducted in the winter of 2020-21.

Earlier this February morning in the FWP White Sulphur Springs office, Francisco did a thorough biological workup. After tranquilizing the marten, he weighed and measured it, drew a small blood sample from its ear, and estimated age based on weight and tooth wear. The marten’s DNA derived from the blood will be critical for tracking the progress of the historic translocation.

Back in the forest, waiting for the reluctant occupant to exit the box, Francisco says he was relieved that this marten and the 29 others trapped in various parts of southwestern Montana for the translocation survived their journeys. “Because they have such a fast metabolism, martens need to keep moving to keep warm. We were concerned that they’d run around so much in the box that the transports could be fatal,” he says. “But it has gone real smooth. They’re tough little critters.”

Suddenly the young male marten pops out of the opening like a jack-in-the-box and surveys his surroundings. Like all martens, he is strikingly handsome, with gray-tipped ears, silky shades of chocolate and amber body fur, and a fiery orange chest patch.

He leaps to a nearby tree and scrambles up 15 feet, pauses, then jumps back to the ground and bounds away. Francisco props the hindquarter of a road-killed deer against a tree and sets up a trail camera to monitor the newcomer’s progress in the coming weeks.

Bringing martens to the Little Belts

For years biologists with FWP and the U.S. Forest Service were unable to find martens in the Little Belts, located between Helena and Lewistown. The mountains contain prime habitat for these members of the



ESSENTIAL EXPERTS Montana Trappers Association members Joe Michaels (left) and Matt Lumley position one of 12 live-traps deep in the Gallatin Range this past winter. Checking the traps daily over several months, they managed to catch three martens for the Little Belts reintroduction project.

weasel family, which favor mature conifer forests and feed on voles, red squirrels, and other small mammals. What’s more, the small carnivores live in the nearby Big Belt Mountains. Biologists looked for marten tracks and asked volunteers with a multistate wolverine survey conducted in 2017 to look for marten sign. But nothing showed up. “If they were there, the wolverine survey would have picked them up,” says Francisco.

No one is sure why the Little Belts lacked martens, but they may have been collateral damage from aggressive predator control campaigns and unregulated trapping in the early 20th century. Until it was outlawed in 1972, woolgrowers regularly used poison to kill coyotes and inadvertently killed martens and other “nontarget” predators and scavengers attracted to the lethal baits.

Because the Little Belts are isolated, surrounded almost entirely by farm- and rangeland, martens never moved in from the Big Belts and other mountainous areas. The forest dwellers feel vulnerable out in the open. “They’ve been an integral part of this moun-

“This has been one of the most rewarding projects I’ve ever had a chance to be a part of.”

tain range ecosystem for millions of years, since the Pleistocene Era,” says Jay Kolbe, FWP wildlife biologist in White Sulphur Springs. “It’s only been in the last 100 years or so they’ve not been present. But because they don’t disperse well across non-forested habitat, once they disappear from areas like this, they don’t ever come back.”

Unless they get a little help.

To transport martens into suitable but marten-devoid habitats, wildlife biologists first had to learn where the small carnivores had the best chance of survival. Kolbe worked with the Montana Natural Heritage Program to develop a “predictive habitat model” based on trapping records.



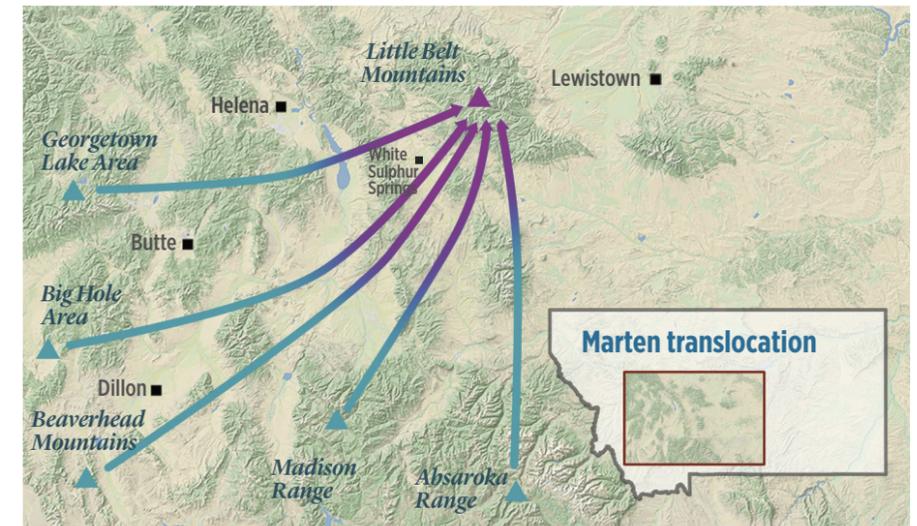
BLOOD WORK As Jay Kolbe looks on, Rob Francisco inserts a drop of blood taken from a sedated marten’s ear into a vial to be sent to a genetics lab. Afterward he will weigh the animal and check tooth wear to determine its age. Though not essential, oxygen is given as a precaution.

Martens are plentiful in many western Montana forests. Each year trappers harvest roughly 1,000 of the furbearers and provide each harvest location to FWP. From approximately 10,000 locations reported over a decade, researchers created computer mapping layers showing forest density, conifer type, water sources, and other factors to build a habitat model. With this tool, Kolbe and his colleagues could see that the Little Belts contained the prime habitat martens prefer and where the best release sites would be. “Biologists have always known this area has quality marten habitat, just by looking at it, but the model backed up that intuition with objective data,” Kolbe says.

Once they knew where to put martens, biologists had to figure out how many to trap and translocate. And from where? They decided a minimum of 60 martens from a variety of locations would be required to provide genetic diversity and maintain a healthy, self-sustaining population.

Montana is home to two marten species: Pacific (*Martes caurina*) and American (*Martes*

americana). Both look the same but are genetically different and, reports suggest, have slightly different coloration. FWP chose to capture Pacific martens in the southwestern part of the state after considering which of



MULTIPLE SOURCES FWP biologists recruited members of the Montana Trappers Association to capture a total of 30 martens from throughout southwestern Montana for the relocation effort.

the two species originally occupied the Little Belts. In addition to the Georgetown Lake area, FWP crews and partners collected martens from the Big Hole, Beaverhead, Madison, and Absaroka areas.

A total of 30 (10 females and 20 males) were trapped and transferred this past winter, and another 30 will undergo the same routine this coming winter. “Our goal is to get at least another 20 females this time,” Kolbe says.

FWP partners with trappers

When the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission approved the marten translocation in 2019, it set in motion a project that was ecologically important and historic. The state’s last translocation took place in 1956 in the Big Belts, just west of White Sulphur Springs. Genetic analysis shows that descendants of the nine martens released that year are still there today.

The Little Belt project cost nearly \$90,000. After securing a \$25,000 contribution from the Great Falls Chapter of Safari Club International, FWP paid the rest with federal Pittman-Robertson funding.

To capture martens for relocation, FWP turned to experts from the Montana Trappers Association (MTA). It wasn’t easy, even for seasoned trappers. For instance, during much of last winter, MTA members Matt Lumley and Joe Michaels took a snowcat each day into the Gallatin Range north of Gardiner to check a dozen marten capture boxes, some-

times in near-blizzard conditions with temperatures below -25 degrees F. The pair eventually live-trapped three martens for the relocation effort. “This has been one of the most rewarding projects I’ve ever had the chance to be a part of,” Lumley says.

Dillon-area trapper Tom Barnes, who spends his winters on a snowmobile running a marten trapline, added capture boxes and live-trapped several animals for the project. “Hopefully FWP will be able to determine some other spots with suitable habitat for marten, because they’re a species we like, and we want to see more viable populations,” he says.

FWP officials say the partnership has been critical to the project’s success. “It’s been fantastic having the fur trappers donate their time and effort to help out,” Kolbe says.

Yet Kolbe notes that the goal of the Little Belts relocation project isn’t to produce furbearers for trapping. “The department has a responsibility wherever possible to restore native wildlife species to native habitat, and this is just a really great opportunity to do that,” he says.

It’s possible that someday the Little Belts population will grow large enough that FWP could allow limited harvest. “But the fact it might not ever happen shows that the trappers who were helping weren’t doing it out of self-interest but from an appreciation of the species and desire to help populations any way they can,” Kolbe adds.

New monitoring method

In July, Kolbe and Francisco venture back to the Little Belts hoping to find and identify some of the 30 translocated martens. The biologist and technician are trying a relatively new method used successfully for tracking wolverines and fishers. They hang a white plastic cylinder on a tree 20 feet above a mountain stream. Above the tube, the inside of which is lined with copper gun-cleaning brushes, is a smelly lure. Martens attracted to the scent must pass through the tube, leaving behind hairs that carry their DNA signature.

Usually furbearer bait stations are set in winter so that bears, then in hibernation,

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MARTEN MONITORING At a site in the Little Belts where martens were released last winter, Francisco descends a Douglas fir on which he has placed a trail camera aimed at a scent station installed on a nearby, thinner tree (to discourage bear visits). The scent station consists of a plastic cylinder (right) fitted with copper gun brushes. The bristles snag hair of martens crawling through to investigate a smelly lure placed at the far end. By checking the camera, Francisco can see if hair in the trap came from a marten or some other curious animal.



don’t take them down. But checking stations can be difficult in deep snow. Kolbe read about overseas biologists monitoring European sable in summer by hanging detection cylinders high on thin trees to dissuade bears from climbing. “It’s so much easier visiting the sites this time of year compared to winter,” he says. A nearby camera trap captures any activity and shows if hairs are from a marten or some other mammal.

As these newly released martens begin to reproduce, DNA collection and analysis could allow biologists to document successful reproduction.

A few weeks later, in August, Francisco checked a camera trap and found that a marten had visited one of the hair-trap sites. Based on coloration in the camera trap photos, he suspects it was F23, a small female originally from the Beaverhead Mountains. He and Kolbe are still awaiting news from a genetics laboratory confirming whether that marten or another of the transplants had visited the bait station. “We have every reason to believe that most if not all of the translocated martens are still alive and doing well,” Francisco says. “But it sure would be nice to have some proof.”

PHOTOS: THOM BRIDGE; OPPOSITE PAGE: JOHN SHARKEY



BACK WHERE IT BELONGS Montana is home to two different marten species: the Pacific and the American. Both live in mature conifer forests, where they feed on voles, red squirrels, and other small mammals. Biologists suspect that Pacific martens originally lived in the Little Belts before they disappeared a century ago.